

INSIGHTS FROM THE 25TH ANNUAL STRATEGY CONFERENCE
“BALANCING THE JOINT FORCE TO MEET FUTURE SECURITY CHALLENGES”
APRIL 8-10, 2014



MEMORANDUM FOR THE CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF: SECURE BALANCE AND FLEXIBILITY IN FUTURE JOINT FORCES



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STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE
U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE
CARLISLE, PENNSYLVANIA
JUNE, 2014

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE JUN 2014		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2014 to 00-00-2014	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Memorandum for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Secure Balance and Flexibility in Future Joint Forces. Insights from the 25th Annual Strategy Conference: 'Balancing the Joint Force to Meet Future Security Challenges' April 8th-10th, 2014			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 47 Ashburn Drive, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5244			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 10	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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This “Memorandum for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff” is open analysis of the major outcomes and implications emerging from the [United States Army War College’s 25th Annual Strategy Conference](#) “Balancing the Joint Force to Meet Future Security Challenges.” This public event was organized by SSI, in close partnership with the Joint Staff J-7 Future Joint Force Development Branch, and occurred April 8th-10th, 2014 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

This year’s conference proceeded from acknowledgement that the use of military forces will change as a consequence of 13 years of continuous operations, fewer material resources, changing threat perceptions, and new levels of discrimination in the conduct of foreign and security policy. The various conference events featured a range of experts from the policymaking, military, research and analysis, academic, and the private sectors. They were asked to attack two foundational questions from their regional or functional perspective. First, what are the most important military demands for U.S. and partner military forces over the next decade and, second, how should they prepare to meet them?

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***Memorandum for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:
Secure Balance and Flexibility in Future Joint Forces
Nathan Freier, Conference Director
June 2014***

Memorandum for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Secure Balance and Flexibility in Future Joint Forces

Background

The Army War College recently hosted its [twenty-fifth annual strategy conference](#) in partnership with your J7’s Future Joint Force Development Directorate. The event’s theme was balancing U.S. and allied military capabilities to meet the most important future

...the most appropriate balance in military capabilities ...secures the greatest degree of strategic and operational flexibility and adaptability.

demands. A number of key insights emerged from this event. However, one dominated virtually

every substantive conference discussion: ***given the breadth of American interests worldwide and trends in the international security environment, U.S. forces must prepare to confront challenges emerging from two very different origins.*** The author commonly [characterizes these as “unfavorable order” and “disorder.”](#) This judgment is echoed in [the J7’s post-conference report](#) as well. Naturally, dramatic variation in sources of threat will translate into wide variance in the nature of specific challenges and the most appropriate military responses to them.

There are significant capabilities implications that emerge from this finding. Principal among them is our post-conference conclusion that, as U.S. joint forces go through their forecasted post-war drawdown, DOD decision makers must maintain balanced military capabilities to contend with a range of future challenges and not seek point solutions optimized for the most topical threat du jour. Balance, in this context, implies smart, risk-based capabilities choices

that account for myriad potential contingency actions inevitably made more complex by varying degrees of strategic warning, access, theater-level freedom of action, and partner will, capability, and capacity. In the end, we offer the following points for your consideration in this regard.

“Unfavorable Order”

The first source of military-relevant threat will emerge from the handful of revisionist state powers commonly identified as either committed to curbing or demonstrating the potential to severely limit U.S. reach and influence across their respective regions. While these real or potential

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adversary states will vary over time in their capability and capacity to do harm, collectively they represent the Pentagon’s traditional threat universe and provide defense planners, relevant combatant commands, and the military services with a common set of high-end military challenges against which to design future concepts, forces, plans, and operations.

These are largely captured in and validated by the two “heavy weight” and two “middle weight” aspects of your [“Two, Two, Two, One”](#) construct. All relevant presenters seemed to agree that the United States and its allies face mounting challenges to their interests from current and prospective adversary states

exhibiting significant intent to dominate their respective spheres of influence. For the purpose of force design and development, these more traditional military threats include

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China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. And, as you suggest in “Two, Two, Two, One”, they are the most logical

pacers or benchmarks for the U.S. and allied capabilities that are most appropriate to combating advanced adversarial powers.

The reasons for this first insight are clear and unassailable. All four powers actively threaten U.S. treaty allies and important non-treaty partners. All also have the potential to wreak havoc on material U.S. interests with very little notice — e.g., commit regional military aggression; hold the physical security of U.S. territory, citizens, and interests at substantial risk; or limit access to and use of the global commons. Among the four, all are also developing asymmetric military capabilities aimed specifically at neutralizing perceived U.S. advantages. And, finally, three of four powers are nuclear states. The fourth — Iran, while not yet a nuclear power, is suspected of pursuing a nuclear breakout capability as an instrument of regional leverage and intimidation and a hedge against future U.S. intervention.

In short, all four real or potential adversary states are developing capabilities and methods that will make an effective U.S./allied entry into theater more problematic and active operations while in theater more difficult and costly. This reality increasingly places a premium on

countervailing U.S./allied strategies and capabilities that are focused first on deterring rival powers from aggressive military activity and, second, in the event of hostilities, altering their cost-benefit calculations and denying them their strategic and operational objectives.

At the highest or most sophisticated end of this set of state-based military challenges, the United States and its allies will likely look to solutions that are more focused on achieving status quo *ante bellum* in the event of conflict, halting through coercion an adversary’s chosen course of action and reversing its impact only to the extent that at-risk U.S. interests are no longer actively under pressure. Specifically, traditional

military threats emerging from either China or Iran will likely play out prominently in the air and

maritime domains with direct threats to adjacent states emerging more from air, sea, ballistic missile, and WMD threats. Iran also presents a significant irregular warfare threat to its neighbors.

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This outlook appears, in most cases, to lend itself to U.S. and allied responses that combine robust air, sea, space, and cyber tools for maximum effect with the intent of increasing adversary costs exponentially. Traditional ground maneuver and combat may be limited in China- or Iran-based scenarios with substantial contributions by Army forces in particular in the area of command and control, special operations, force protection, air and missile defense, long-range fires, and logistics.

Many contingencies associated with an aggressive North Korea or Russia, on the other hand, are more likely to require large-scale, multi-phase combined arms operations involving significant combat capabilities across all five warfighting domains (land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace). Any traditional scenario on the Korean Peninsula, for example, would involve U.S. joint operations alongside a very capable *in situ* regional partner (Republic of Korea). In spite of this, however, U.S. ground force contributions would still be significant. A notable complication for any Korean scenario is the fact that it would occur in the shadow of two substantial (and potentially hostile) rival great powers (China and Russia). Both would have significant interests in the outcome of any conflict on the Korean Peninsula and both present real horizontal escalation challenges.

In the case of a confrontation with Russia by itself, large-scale combined arms operations are likeliest to occur on the periphery of and in conjunction with the NATO alliance with the likeliest U.S./allied objective being some restoration of the pre-crisis order or the physical protection of vulnerable regimes that lie within Russia's traditional sphere of influence. As in the case of Korea, Russian proximity to vulnerable U.S. allies makes ground combat more plausible. In addition, the Russian military has access to many of the same sophisticated tools that are at the disposal of China and Iran and thus make U.S. theater entry and freedom of action very problematic. Most notable in this regard are ballistic missiles, sophisticated air defenses, and long range fires. In its recent activities in and around Ukraine, Russia has also shown an aptitude and proclivity for leveraging proxy irregular forces to achieve its objectives. Naturally, the most significant

challenge for the United States in any future conflict with Russia involves its possession of a sophisticated strategic nuclear arsenal.

From both a national decision making and total joint force perspective then, all of these considerations combined may indicate that traditional and hybrid threats from Russia may be emerging as the most multi-dimensional and complicated of the four principal state-based threats. However, in light of the high stakes associated with direct confrontation between the world's two most prominent nuclear powers, it may also remain the least likely of the state-based warfighting scenarios.

The "Disorder" Challenge

The second threat source identified in our conference includes the wide spectrum of complex and sometimes seemingly "headless" challenges that may surface from a progressive and unpredictable fraying of traditional political authority and order in key regions worldwide. Terrorism and insurgency are certainly

manifestations of this. However, together they do not constitute its sum total. Nor, from a defense planning

perspective, are they necessarily representative of the most challenging future circumstances falling into this category. Indeed, DOD may be well served to examine the pathology of organic, spontaneous, pan-regional developments like the "Arab Awakening" to identify the kinds of future military demands that may emerge from what can only be

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described as foundational volatility and instability in core regions of interest.

Though the defense bureaucracy may be fond of neatly categorizing future threats, the future in this regard is likely to defy traditional classifications like major theater war,

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insurgency, and terrorism. Specific disorder challenges may be more prone to emerge in the absence of an easily identifiable central trigger or purpose or, for that

matter, from a single, unitary, and readily targeted adversary. This distinction separates these new-age disorder threats from both traditional state-based threats and our recent experience against the al Qaeda network.

From a strategy and capabilities perspective, military planners and defense strategists should think more of Hobbes’ “War of All Against All” when considering future disorder challenges. They will likely emerge first as grass roots disaffection and resistance to established authority that is fueled and accelerated by profound electronic connectivity and will benefit from the inevitable power vacuums that are born of weak or failed political institutions. These spasms of sub- and transnational instability will be rooted in complicated and competing political, economic, religious, and ethnic interests and will increasingly be difficult to contain geographically.

While the kinds of challenges described above include many of the same threats all Americans want to avoid given the last decade of war, the likelihood that they will at times encroach on

and impact important U.S., allied, and partner interests will require the continued attention of senior U.S. civilian and military leadership. At a minimum, emergence of consequential disorder may put key U.S. security and economic interests at substantial hazard, requiring measured military responses to manage or limit the degree to which they can harm the same. At the other extreme, violent disorder challenges may be so significant and problematic — emerging as obvious and direct threats to important interests — that they call for more comprehensive politico-military responses that might involve extended operations in contested theaters with substantial numbers of U.S./allied forces. Therefore, these factors should have a central role in future ground force structure and missioning.

Two issues make this kind of threat particularly problematic given current strategy and policy preferences. First, warning associated with the onset of important disorder challenges may be more limited as the virtual and distributed mobilization of political action becomes an increasing reality. Consider the fact that no threat is strictly local in this regard. Further, recent events have proven the potential for violent instability to rapidly metastasize.

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The second dominant issue is the fact that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan appear to have extinguished any high-level appetite to posture

forces for response to disorder-based threats. Indeed, notable in the conference deliberations was both wide acknowledgement of troubling trends in the durability of traditional political authority worldwide accompanied by very little acknowledgement of a direct American military requirement to be prepared to contend with it. This cognitive dissonance is likely more a product of strategic exhaustion than strategic calculation.

Hybrid Threats:

“Unfavorable Order” Meets “Disorder”

There is to be sure a complex middle ground between these two pure extremes where threat types collide and liberally mix into very

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challenging hybrid combinations. We see this currently unfolding in places like Ukraine, Syria, and Iraq. In all three of these cases,

traditional state rivals are competing on the back of pre-existing or ready-made civil conflict; so much so, that it is difficult to untangle specific actors and motives. The amalgamation of “disorder” and old fashioned power politics creates unique challenges for U.S. and allied military planners.

To the extent U.S./allied military responses may become necessary, they would require the nimble combination of capabilities and core competencies. For example, even a limited military response to a future “soft invasion” of the type on display in Ukraine — consider a contingency where U.S. forces only provide “enabling” capabilities to an at-risk partner — would occur in the face of widespread use of local forces, proxy irregulars, and the regular

forces and capabilities of a rival power. Meaningful U.S. and partner responses to this kind of challenge would occur under the persistent threat of high-end escalation by the external aggressor. This would necessitate access to a readily employable suite of capabilities covering the waterfront of military demands from pure support and distributed security operations to more traditional combat actions. In short, there is neither a one size fits all solution for future force planning nor a single reliable template for effective response to these new hybrids.

Implications: Perils of Over-Simplification

If assumptions are the “presumed” — vice “known” — knowns of military planning and concept development and, if both plans and concepts rely on assumptions that reflect ground truth, then future defense decision making should accept the existence of this more complex challenge set as a foundational proposition for future military choices. For senior decision makers, the most important implication of this overarching insight is recognition of the very real potential for its outright rejection and the attendant risk and miscalculation in force planning that may ensue.

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Future choices that over-value one of these two primary threats over the other expose U.S. interests to significant vulnerability. There is, of course, an allure to identifying a single trend in international security affairs as most dominant

or impactful and proceeding to build military forces optimized for (or exclusive to) it. However, in the wake of the conference, we judge that both threat types will generate unique military demands. And, in the end, it is difficult to discount the prospect that the most compelling threats may in fact emerge from the least-considered set of future challenges, leaving U.S. and allied forces fundamentally unready for what becomes on very short notice their new priority demand.

As such, both the primary sources of consequential threat and their hybrid combination are critically important to future defense planning and force development. Each

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requires distinctly different politico-military antidotes in response. There are also distinct military demands within threat types. For example,

response to aggression by China in the western Pacific will require efforts that weight the direct contributions of air, sea, space, and cyber forces more heavily than ground combat forces; whereas, threats emerging from North Korea or Russia likely require a substantially different prioritization and weighting of capabilities.

What was made clear over the three days of conference debate was the fact that U.S. decision makers ignore one or the other of these challenges at their peril. Effective military responses against either or both threats require an adaptable set of future military tools and concepts. Thus, meaningful work to develop these tools and concepts is required now.

Recommendation:

Balanced and Flexible Future Joint Forces

Sage advice from [Admiral Dennis Blair](#) is worth paraphrasing at this point. He was particularly keen to remind conference attendees that force size or capacity — especially in an era of declining resources — was a political call shared between the President and Congress. However, responsibility for the force’s future capability — or consideration of what missions the force should be prepared to take on (e.g., major theater wars, armed stabilization, coercive campaigns, etc.) — lies with senior military leaders who must weigh and mitigate the risks associated with shaping and employing forces that are certain to never be fully optimized for any of the tasks they are ultimately assigned by U.S. political leaders.

Thus, going forward “balance” and “flexibility” will need to be the watch words of future U.S. and allied military capability and readiness. Neither balance nor flexibility implies the absence of prioritization. Finite resources require that some military capabilities will by definition need to be preserved and favored at the net expense of others.

Balance and flexibility do, however, mean that senior U.S. decision makers must preserve capabilities for the likeliest, most dangerous, and the most disruptive potential threats.

This is particularly true in light of a decade of war that saw the United States military focus — perhaps to a fault — on counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism.

Balance and flexibility do, however, mean that senior U.S. decision makers must preserve capabilities for the likeliest, most dangerous,

and the most disruptive potential threats. The “likeliest” threats are those that are forecasted to emerge from a rational and linear projection of current events —i.e., if these trends continue, these specific threats are most plausible. The most “dangerous” threats are those that also adhere to some linear logic, though they are perhaps more extreme and less plausible overall than those identified as likely. However, should they emerge they would be much more damaging to American interests. Finally, the most “disruptive” threats and challenges are those that are logical but perhaps somewhat discontinuous from current trends and are also under-considered in light of internal choices about defense capabilities and priorities. The “disruptive” potential of these kinds of challenges lies in the fact that response to them would require the most radical institutional adjustments. In this regard, consider the force in being of 2001 that was predicated on two near simultaneous traditional wars but rapidly found itself fighting a global terrorist network and two complex insurgencies.

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American and allied military options. This will play out most profoundly in the emerging great power contest in the Indo-Pacific region, as was made very clear by Admiral Blair and [Robert Kaplan](#) in his opening address. With recent events in Eastern Europe, that theater too should be very high on the DOD watch list.

Countering that expected course is a priority for the future force.

It is, however, equally likely that the United States and its partners will face unique and growing challenges from new failures of political authority of the type witnessed in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine. Kaplan, Blair, and [Lieutenant General Sir Graeme Lamb](#) were clear on this point as well. All agree that foundational changes in the relationship between governments and the governed are afoot worldwide. The transition to a new status quo in many cases will be turbulent, disorderly, widely contested, and unpredictable. U.S. and allied interests are certain to be under pressure as a consequence. Therefore, this prospect too will require appropriate military hedging.

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Clearly the most dangerous prospects with respect to the “unfavorable order” challenge involve potential military confrontations with China and Russia. Whereas, the most dangerous threats from “disorder” involve wholesale failure of a nuclear state, uncontrolled civil conflict across the greater Middle East, and the prospect of failing governments and violent civil conflict in the Americas. Negative effects in all three of these cases harbor great potential to transcend geographic boundaries, posing substantial hazards to the United States and its international partners.

Finally, U.S. and allied forces should be mindful that institutional certainty about which future challenges are most important (i.e., most likely

or most dangerous) is liable to be precisely wrong — especially to the extent that those judgments are based more on preference, convenience, or hope than they are on a thorough appraisal of current and projected strategic conditions. In the end, too much certainty about the future now is a recipe for surprise, shock, and dislocation in the future.

Effectively hedging against these outcomes requires persistent horizon-scanning, wargaming, and net assessment focused on the least predictable and most disruptive future outcomes. Building an agile, adaptable, and balanced force will buffer joint forces against a consistent record of failing to forecast the most taxing future requirements.

Nathan Freier is an associate professor of national security studies at the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute and was the conference director for the 25th Annual U.S. Army War College Strategy Conference “Balancing the Joint Force to Meet Future Security Challenges.” The views expressed in this article the author’s and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Army War College, the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or the United States Government.